

## Having Won Freedom, He Wants To Help Others

Conviction tossed after 8 years, goal now is to become a lawyer

BY **STEFANO ESPOSITO** Staff Reporter

*Excerpted*

As Jarrett Adams began a 28-year prison term for sexual assault, he turned to his new cell-mate -- a bespectacled man in his late 50s doing life for a double murder -- and declared: "I'm innocent."

"Young brother, that's everybody's story once they get in here," the older man told the then-17-year-old Adams. "What you need to do is sit down and figure out how you're going to articulate that you didn't do it."

Adams spent eight years in prison, including that first stay at Dodge Correctional Institution in Waupun, Wis., until a federal appeals court overturned his conviction in 2006 -- citing ineffective legal counsel. But it was those words from an inmate without hope of freedom that drove Adams to the place where he is today.

On Sunday, Adams, now 29, will graduate with a 3.7 grade-point average from South Suburban College in South Holland. He'll attend Loyola University Chicago this fall, with plans to earn a law degree.

"He's a constant reminder," Adams says of that inmate he met back in 1999. "I looked at him, and I didn't want to be him."

Adams had just graduated from Hillcrest High School in Country Club Hills when some of his buddies invited him to a party at the University of Wisconsin campus in Whitewater on Sept. 5, 1998.

"Who was going to turn that down?" said Adams, a clean-cut young man who leans in when he talks, frequently narrowing his eyes in an effort to convince you of his earnestness...

... "The way the case was presented, we were the scum of the earth from Chicago," Adams recalled. One of Adams' buddies also spent time in prison before his case was overturned.

Armed with only a high school diploma, Adams set to work to prove his innocence. He sent 40 letters a week -- to a range of people and places, including Oprah Winfrey, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the NAACP.



**Loyola-bound Jarrett Adams will graduate Sunday from South Suburban College.**

*(Scott Stewart/Sun-Times)*

*CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE...*

Adams made weekly visits to the prison law library -- which was “the size of a basic kitchen,” Adams recalled.

Pages are missing out of books ‘cause guys will take a page out and write a note” on them.

If he couldn’t find a page, he’d write to lawyers he didn’t know and beg them to send it to him -- which they often did.

He helped other inmates file written responses when they got nailed for prison-rule infractions.

“You actually get to show up with the inmate as his advocate and present his case,” Adams said. “A lot of these guys don’t know how to speak, they don’t know how to read.”

In 2002, Adams sought the help of the Wisconsin Innocence Project -- a University of Wisconsin Law School program devoted to helping the wrongly convicted.

Adams was “exceptional,” recalled Keith Findley, the Innocence Project’s co-director. “There are many clients who understand their own story ... but few, if any, who grasp the legal proceedings and have as much insight about how to litigate a case as he does -- and it’s remarkable because it was all [knowledge] he acquired while he was in prison.”

Findley said it was Adams who focused the law students’ attention on the ineffective public defender that was assigned to his case. That issue ultimately led the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals to rule unanimously to overturn his conviction. Adams was released from prison in February 2007 after his accuser said she didn’t want to relive the trial...

...Ever since he was freed, Adams has been laser-focused on his education. He wants to become a lawyer so he can help the wrongfully accused.

“I have a built-in clock, a built-in sense of urgency,” he said. “It’s hard for me to be patient.”

Adams lives in a neat but spartan South Side apartment. He has a girlfriend. He is trying to figure out how he’s going to pay for law school. The nonprofit Illinois Education Foundation, which has awarded more than \$3 million in scholarships to low-income community college students since 2006, paid for his tuition at South Suburban and will pay a small portion of his expenses at Loyola.

Adams perhaps has ample reason to be angry -- at his first lawyer, his accuser, the prison system -- but he says he doesn’t want to dwell on the issue and become distracted from his education.

So what would be the ultimate reward for studying law? Helping free another wrongfully convicted inmate.

“I would love to have the opportunity to call a family and say, so-and-so is coming home today.”

---